

# Understand (Mis)perceptions of Archives

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## **Abstract:**

Recent scholarship on archival users has generally focused on current users of archives and has assumed a general knowledge of archives and archivists among both users and potential users. However, while the archival literature has largely ignored potential users and non-users, the library literature has shown the importance of better understanding these groups and offers a useful lens through which to view our own field. Based on in-depth interviews with ten faculty members this research study shows the large disconnect between how archivists and non-archivists conceive of archives, and it advocates for a rethinking of how we understand and approach users and potential users. It identifies three main findings: (1) the collections and functions of archives are not fully understood and are often conflated with libraries and museums; (2) based on barriers to access and lack of knowledge of archives there is a pressing need for basic outreach and education about the purpose and functions of the archives; and (3) archives are considered extremely valuable even when individuals are not sure what archives are or what they offer. This research represents a first step toward learning how people conceive of archives, and what it shows is that there is a surfeit of misconceptions about what archives preserve and what their purpose is. This extreme lack of knowledge needs to be combated with better and more targeted educational campaigns and greater outreach initiatives, which can only occur once we know what both our users and non-users think of archives.

## **About the Author:**

*Kelsey Duinkerken* is the Special Collections and Digitization Librarian at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, where she manages the Archives' digital records, web archiving, social media, oral history program, and institutional repository holdings. She has a BA in History and Anthropology as well as an MSI with a specialization in Archives and Records Management from the University of Michigan.